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MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Chief, USSR/Eastern Europe
Division, OER

THROUGH : Deputy Director of Current Intelligence

SUBJECT : Contribution to Briefing for Secretary
Richardson

US-USSR Bilateral Political Relations

1. US-Soviet political relations have suffered a series of shocks since late 1973 which, while not completely destroying the structure of "detente," have left it shaky. From the Soviets' perspective the most serious disappointments have been:

--US refusal to liberalize tariff and credit legislation.

--The continued momentum of US military spending and weapons programs.

--Their loss of influence in the Middle East, for which they blame the US.

The US presidential campaign has raised further doubts in Moscow about the firmness of Washington's commitment to improved bilateral relations.

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2. Soviet reaction has taken the form of strenous efforts to undercut the US in areas of competition such as southern Africa, to press its own military programs, and to increase and sharpen its anti-American propaganda. Regarding the latter, Moscow has become much less reluctant in recent months to criticize harshly the President and Secretary of State. President Ford was attacked in the Soviet media last month, for example, for allegedly reneging on his commitments at the 1975 European Security Conference.

3. The Soviets, despite their frustrations, continue to adhere publicly and privately to the general "detente" line they have pursued throughout the 1970s. On the one hand Moscow remains spurred by the concerns it faced when its "peace program" was initially formulated:

 --The need to avoid nuclear confrontation with the US;

 --Fear of China and of a Sino-American rapprochement; and

 --The limitations imposed by an inflexible, inefficient economy.

4. On the other hand, detente has paid off for the Soviets in several other, more positive ways. The USSR has won increasing recognition as the military and

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political equal of the US. The expansion of East-West trade has eased Moscow's present economic difficulties while offering the prospect of helping to modernize Soviet industry.

5. The Soviets evidently hope that bilateral relations will improve once again after the US elections. Moscow believes that the fundamentals of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger policy toward the USSR will continue regardless of who the next president may be.

6. Meanwhile, the Soviets are making no predictions about what they obviously regard as a close race. Publicly they have not taken sides, finding merit and fault in the positions of both candidates, but the Soviets, given their penchant for stability and predictability, traditionally prefer that an incumbent remain in office.

7. For themselves, the Soviets show few signs that they are prepared to modify their own policies in response to US complaints. They may in the future assess more broadly the costs of a venture such as Angola, but they continue to make plain their intention to act in support of "progressive" forces, seeing no contradiction with their concept of "detente."

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Soviet Political Assessment

An Old Guard

8. The Soviet domestic political scene is characterized by continuity to the point of stagnation. The leadership, with General Secretary of the Communist Party Brezhnev at its head, continues to be dominated by those of Khrushchev's colleagues who combined to oust him in 1964.

9. The scheduled gathering in Moscow on October 27 of the USSR Supreme Soviet--the rubber-stamp parliament--and the more important meeting of the party's Central Committee that will precede it, will provide opportunities to make changes in the top leadership. The Soviet leaders, however, have long been ignoring such opportunities, despite their age and sporadic bouts with ill-health which have tended to generate a aura of overdue change.

10. The five senior leaders who form a conservative inner core in the Politburo are all close to or past 70:

--Brezhnev, the youngest, will be 70 in December;

he now appears reasonably well, but has suffered from periodic ailments that sapped his strength.

--Podgorny, the titular head of state, is 73.

--Kosygin, the Premier and in charge of the economic apparatus, is 72; he is now reportedly recovering from a heart attack.

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--Suslov, the party's top ideologue, is the oldest at 74.

--Kirilenko, Brezhnev's unofficial deputy in the party and likely interim successor, has just turned 70.

11. Beyond the roles of Brezhnev and the seniors, key portfolios at the top of the party are usually managed by more than one leader. Generally, however, Kirilenko probably supervises heavy industry; Kulakov, a Politburo member and party secretary, probably coordinates the troublesome agricultural front with Brezhnev himself also making a personal input; party secretaries Katushev and Ponomarev handle international communist relations and are responsible respectively for ruling and non-ruling parties, both working under Brezhnev's and Suslov's supervision.

12. In the government, and especially to support his detente program, Brezhnev has looked to three men whom he promoted to full Politburo membership in 1973 and who head key institutions:

--Gromyko, Foreign Minister since 1957.

--Andropov, head of the KGB for nine years.

--Grechko, Defense Minister who died in April.

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13. To replace Grechko, the leadership passed over several qualified military officers and chose one of themselves--67 year old Politburo member Ustinov, who has long supervised the defense industry from the party Secretariat. Though he now holds the rank of marshal of the Soviet Union, Ustinov is the first civilian in many years to hold this sensitive portfolio.

Style of Rule

14. One reason for the barely glacial movement in domestic politics is the Brezhnev regime's deliberate reversal of Khrushchev's highly personal and activist style, stressing instead collective decisionmaking and job security. This tends to be true throughout the party hierarchy, and turnover is thus slow.

15. The criteria for success in Soviet politics are competence, hard work, skill in managing patron-client relationships and keeping one's nose clean. The system is well protected against outsiders, youth and anyone who does not follow the unwritten rules. Putting a premium on avoiding risk, it tends to stifle personal initiative and to encourage bureaucratic sclerosis. While some of the younger officials in the party and government apparatus perceive the need for improvement if not reform, they are not questioning the system.

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16. The character and outlook of most of the Soviet people are conducive to this style of rule. They are for the most part preoccupied with their material needs and crave personal security and social tranquility. Concerns over the generally tough policies on culture, human rights, religion and emigration that agitate a certain strata of society do not generate an echo from the masses.

Outlook

17. Kosygin's reported ill-health could result in some changes in the top hierarchy. Nevertheless, public scheduling of the Supreme Soviet session suggests that Kosygin, who should speak on and present for approval the 1976-80 five year economic plan, is expected to be well enough to undertake this task.

18. Any planned changes could be signalled by party shifts at the Central Committee meeting in advance of the Supreme Soviet session. One might be the promotion to the Politburo of N. Tikhonov, who was recently appointed first deputy premier, possibly to lighten Kosygin's workload. Another could be the unfinished business of formally dropping Ustinov from the Secretariat, a move normally required by a ministerial appointment.

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19. Over the longer term of the next few years, important changes in the top leadership are all but inevitable. They are more likely to come as a result of death or infirmity, however, than because young politicians are plotting against their elders.

20. Succession in the USSR is always a political struggle. It is a rare event in Soviet history--only three instances since 1917--and no set rules exist for turnover at the top, either in party rules or in constitutional provisions. This time around, however, we expect another drawn out process as the top leaders seek to hang on together as long as they can. The longer this takes, however, the more likely it is that long suppressed elements of instability caused by lack of room at the top will come into play.

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